

VZCZCXR06906  
RR RUEHDT RUEHPB  
DE RUEHWL #0071/01 0570412  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 260412Z FEB 08  
FM AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5099  
INFO RUEHNZ/AMCONSUL AUCKLAND 1633  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 5118  
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY 0652  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 WELLINGTON 000071

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PACOM FOR J01E/J2/J233/J5/SJFHQ

E.O. 12958: N/A  
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SUBJECT: HAVE NEW ZEALAND VOTERS SIMPLY TUNED OUT LABOUR?

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**¶1.** (SBU) Summary. Successive political polls in the past two weeks showed that the ruling Labour Party has failed to cut into the opposition National Party's sizable lead as the 2008 election year begins. The Colmar Brunton poll, New Zealand's most important, had Labour at 34% trailing National at 53%. This was followed by the Fairfax Media-Nielsen poll which showed Labour at 32% compared to National's 55%. This coincided with a sequence of political controversies and problems for the Government, compounding a particularly bad period for Labour. Although it is still early in the election cycle, these polls may have Labour worrying that, regardless of its policy announcements designed to appeal across a wide spectrum of the population, voters nonetheless remain unmoved. End Summary.

Labour Still Trailing

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**¶2.** (SBU) In its first survey for the 2008 election year New Zealand's most prominent political poll, the Colmar Brunton poll, underscored the main opposition National Party's continued dominance over the ruling Labour Party. Released over the February 16-17 weekend, the poll found the National Party at 53%, with the Labour at 34%. These numbers have not changed much in the two months since the last poll in December 2007. An analysis of recent Colmar Brunton polls shows the trend in favor of National and against Labour remains unabated. Labour's political ally, the Green Party, up 4.1 points to 6%, was the only other party to register over the 5% threshold needed for representation in parliament on the basis of party vote alone. On these findings, National could conceivably govern alone without needing any support from the minor parties as presently required by Labour.

**¶3.** (SBU) In the same poll, National Party leader John Key increased his lead over Prime Minister Helen Clark in the Preferred Prime Minister stakes. Key was up one point to 36% with Clark dropping three points to 27%. On economic outlook, the poll revealed that pessimists of New Zealand's economic prospects continue to grow at the expense of optimists.

**¶4.** (SBU) If Labour thought that the latest Colmar Brunton poll was dire, worse was to come a week later. The Fairfax Media-Nielsen poll, released over the February 23-24 weekend, found that since the last poll in November 2007 National surged 10 points to 55% with Labour losing 8 points to 32%. This result was front-page news in the weekend edition of the Dominion Post newspaper, where emphasis was given to National's 23-point lead over Labour being its biggest since Labour took office in 1999. Compounding the grim news for

Clark was Key's dramatic overtaking of her in the Preferred PM stakes. In the Fairfax Media-Neilsen poll, Key gained 8 points to 44% to Clark, who dropped 9 points to 29%.

National: Labour Faces New Reality

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15. (SBU) A National Party Member of Parliament has told us that although his party is extremely pleased by both poll results, it nonetheless remains guarded against any complacency. The MP commented that despite her diminishing personal support in the polls, National still regards Clark as Labour's most potent political asset. However, the MP observed that in John Key, Clark now faces the most capable National Party leader she has ever faced in an election year.

A Series of Unfortunate Events for Labour

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16. (SBU) The poll results came during an already depressing period for Labour, which has been forced on the defensive by a sequence of bad political news. Over the past week, Clark has had to defend her Government against allegations of accepting inappropriate donations from a wealthy expatriate Labour donor, and purportedly promising the same donor a possible cabinet position and the honorary diplomatic post in Monaco. Her government has also been criticized for published failings in the health sector. Another blow for Labour has been the growing expectation that its ability to deliver oft-promised tax cuts in this election year may be sharply curtailed after release of the Government's tax receipts showed USD 158 million less than forecast.

Labour's Early Year Political Renewal Dashed

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17. (SBU) The Labour Government had high hopes for making inroads into National's popularity after starting the year with an active program of well-received policy announcements. It has also made

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some recent decisions that were broadly supported by the public, e.g. its strong stance against Japanese whaling. However, these poll results in addition to recent negative press have derailed any immediate hopes Labour had for narrowing the polling gap at the start of the 2008 political season. Clark has since predicted that further government policy announcements will show voters that the Labour government is firmly behind their concerns and popular support will return to Labour.

18. (SBU) Labour is likely to be extremely frustrated by these poll results because, on balance, it had done little wrong since the start of the year. Yet despite a terse-looking Clark at some recent public events, there are no obvious signs of this frustration within Labour ranks. Labour is likely to console itself in that the election is still many months away and there is time to re-group. However, it must nonetheless be alarmed that these polls did not account for Labour's recent PR debacle in its sampling.

Comment

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19. (SBU) A year ago, leading pundits patiently explained that while National as a party was ahead in most polls, Clark would continue to dominate the leadership ratings and effectively balance the contest. However, Key's leadership surge at her expense has shattered Clark's hitherto impregnability and has enticed some media to venture that the only way for Labour to regain pre-election traction is to install Trade Minister Phil Goff as leader. Clark is, however, unlikely to be removed from her post by Labour's caucus, where she maintains solid support. Nevertheless, the party must be concerned that after nine years in power, the New Zealand public has simply stopped listening to Clark -- and like voters in Australia, may be looking for change for change's sake. End Comment.

McCormick